

Chinese Lanterns

Chinese lanterns (*Physalis alkekengi*, or *Physalis franchetti*), also called Winter Cherry, Strawberry Tomato, or Love in a Cage, illuminate the fall garden with bright orange color resembling miniature lanterns. With unique balloon-like husks, the dried lanterns make wonderful Halloween or fall flower arrangement additions. The ribbed husks are actually sepals that have fused together to enclose the fruit. The cherry tomato-like fruit is contained within this puffy calyx. The leaves and unripe fruit are poisonous, although the ripe fruit is reported to be edible and is sometimes used in jams. The ripe fruit contains more vitamin C than lemons, and is correspondingly sour. These interesting perennials are native to Southeastern Europe and Japan and are related to tomatoes, peppers and petunias in the nightshade family (Solanaceae).



The genus name, *Physalis*, is derived from the Greek word for bladder. During the Renaissance (14th to 17th century), physicians following the Doctrine of Signatures thought that the shape of a plant indicated its medicinal purpose, and therefore the bladder-shaped calyx of the Chinese lantern indicated it should be used to treat kidney and bladder disease. The calyx and fruit are also used in Chinese medicine.

The Chinese lantern plant can be grown from seed (available from several sources on the Internet). Seeds should be sown indoors 6–8 weeks before planting out. It prefers full sun to light shade, and moist well-drained soil. The plant spreads by rhizomes and is somewhat invasive. It might be wise to restrict its root area with an underground barrier in order to contain its spread if you are concerned. In the second year after planting, you can expect 18–24 inch plants with white five-petaled flowers. The flowers will be replaced by green bladders that expand like balloons to nearly 2 inches in diameter. As the husk changes to bright orange-red, the fruit inside matures to a shiny matching color. When the color change is complete, you can cut the stems for drying. If the husks are left on the plant, they will provide fall color until completely dry and open, and the seeds are dry enough to scatter in the wind.

To use the miniature papery lanterns in decorations and flower arrangements, remove the leaves and carefully dry the stems in a cool, airy place with husks attached in an upright position. The lanterns will hang gracefully and retain their color for several years. A variation can be obtained by cutting along the veins of the still moist lantern from tip to base so the pods curl in interesting shapes and expose the fruit inside. Again, dry upright. If desired, spray with clear plastic to preserve them and make them more durable.

References

B.E. Kostich "Chinese Lanterns" Flower and Garden Magazine, Oct–Nov, 1993.

Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2007 [Chinese Lantern Plant](#) retrieved 9/12/07.

Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources: [Fall Ornamentals](#) retrieved 9/12/07.

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